

How to Respond to Children's Questions

Save the Children prepared the following ten tips to help adults support children through times of crisis. The tips are based upon the organization's many years of experience providing emotional support to children during natural disasters.

After 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, and other U.S. emergencies, Save the Children's expert teams on the ground used these tips effectively. They have been proven just as effective when used as a guide for other adults. The relevance of different tips may vary, depending on such factors as a child's previous experience, age and where he or she lives. But as a tool, they offer a strong foundation for actively protecting and supporting children facing difficult issues.

1. **Set age-appropriate limits on television.** Watching television reports on disasters can overwhelm very young children. They may not understand that the tape of an event is being replayed, and instead think the disaster is happening over and over again. Overexposure to coverage of frightening events affects teenagers and adults as well. Age-appropriate television limits should be set both for you and your children.
2. **Listen to your children carefully.** Before responding, get a clear picture of what it is that they understand and what is leading to their questions. Emotional stress results in part when a child cannot give meaning to dangerous experiences. Find out what the child understands about what has happened. A child's knowledge will be determined by age and previous exposure to such events. Begin a dialogue to help the child gain a basic understanding that is age-appropriate and responds to the child's underlying concerns.
3. **Give children reassurance and psychological first-aid.** Assure them about all that is being done to protect children who have been directly affected by this crisis. Take this opportunity to let them know that if any emergency or crisis should occur, your primary concern will be their safety. Make sure they know they are being protected.
4. **Be alert for significant changes.** Parents should be alert to any significant changes in sleeping patterns, eating habits, concentration, wide emotional swings or frequent physical complaints without apparent illness. If present, these will likely subside within a short time. If the changes are prolonged, however, we encourage you to seek professional support and counseling. For children directly affected by a crisis — such as children who have lost a loved one — parents should consult a pediatrician or available health care provider, and consider counseling, not just for the child, but for the entire family. It may be an important preventative measure. For many other children, even if they are not directly affected by a crisis, they too can be affected by the images they see and stories they hear.
5. **Expect the unexpected.** Not every child will experience these events in the same way. As children develop, their intellectual, physical and emotional capacities change. Younger children will depend largely on their parents to interpret events, while older children and teenagers will get information from a variety of sources, which may not be reliable. Understand that older teenagers, because of their greater capacity for understanding, may be more affected by these stories. While older teenagers seem to have more capacity to recover, they still need extra love, understanding and support to process these events.

6. **Give your children extra time and attention.** They need your close, personal involvement to comprehend that they are safe and secure. Talk, play and, most important, listen to them. Find time to engage in special activities for children of all ages. Read bedtime stories and sing songs to help younger children fall asleep.
7. **Be a model for your child.** Your child will learn how to deal with these events by seeing how you deal with them. Base the amount of self-disclosure on the age and developmental level of each of your children. Explain your feelings but remember to do so calmly.
8. **Watch your own behavior.** Make a point of showing sensitivity toward those impacted by the disaster. This is an opportunity to teach your children that we all need to help each other.
9. **Help your children return to normal activities.** Children almost always benefit from activity, goal orientation and sociability. Ensure that your child's school environment is returning to normal patterns. Once restored, most classroom time in school should not be spent discussing the crisis.
10. **Encourage your older child to do volunteer work.** Helping others can give your child a sense of control, security and empathy. In the midst of a crisis, adolescents and youth can emerge as active agents of positive change. Encourage your older children to help support local charities that assist children in need.